Pre-application Doctoral Communications: A Participatory Workshop Exploring Institutional Gatekeeping in Doctoral Admissions

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#PADC_project Project website: **https://warwick.ac.uk/padc**
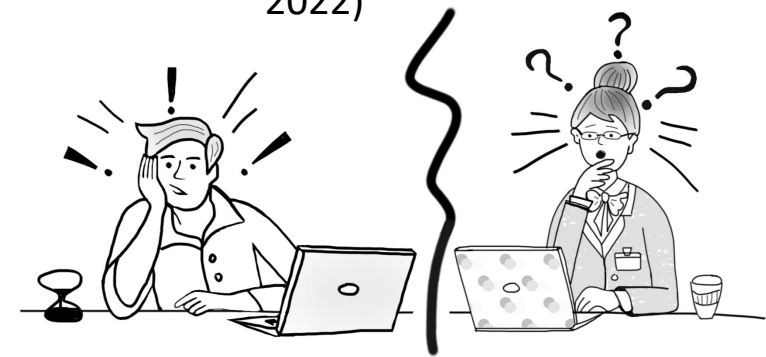
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Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

But first: what are pre-admissions doctoral communications (PADC)?

PADC defined as: *communications that potential doctoral applicants may have with university staff prior to making a formal application to study.*

Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

- Often emails from applicants to supervisors, Programme Officers (POs) or Director of Postgraduate Rsearch (DPGRs)

- May include other forms too – video/phone calls, dropping by, approaches on social media, at conferences)

- May be forwarded communications within departments (e.g. from DPGR to supervisor)

Workshop objectives

(i) to consider the roles of various stakeholders in the pre-application stage

(ii) to collectively refine understandings of this aspect of admissions

(iii) to consider potential channels of action that could ameliorate some of the inequalities that emerge in this stage of admissions.

Workshop structure

- A short presentation on pre-application stage (15 min)
  - Wider context of doctoral admissions & EDI issues
  - Introduction to our research project
- Interactive activities (30 min)
  - Discussion of sample pre-application emails
  - Evaluation of pre-application webpage content
- Open discussion (15 min)

Diversity and the researcher workforce

▶ Limited diversity of the researcher workforce is a national concern.

▶ Doctoral education is integral to researcher training, often the 'gateway'.

▶ Wealth of research on challenges facing minoritised doctoral students in the UK – including women, black minority ethnic (BME) groups, and students living with a disability (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016)

The vision for the strategy is: a more inclusive, dynamic, productive and sustainable UK R&D sector in which a diversity of people and ideas can thrive (p. 14)

R&D People and Culture Strategy

People at the heart of R&D

EDI and doctoral admissions

▶ Doctoral admissions: a key point of intervention to develop a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse research workforce.

▶ Much EDI and doctoral admissions scholarship has a particular focus on exclusionary nature of admissions criteria (Mountford et al., 2007; Potvin et al., 2017; Cano et al., 2018; Ghost et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019; Squire, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021).

▶ Further studies on how academic staff identities influence decision-making (Squire 2020)

▶ Many studies are US-focused, discipline-specific, few take an institutional approach.

As Julie Posselt has argued: *professors play an underexamined role as gatekeepers of the professions, including the professoriate. One context in which this gatekeeping occurs is admission into graduate programs, which entails evaluative processes that are often opaque to outsiders and taken for granted by insiders* (2014, p. 482).

Pre-application as a 'gatekeeping' moment

▶ Our study focuses on one neglected element of the doctoral admissions process: **pre-application communications.**

▶ For prospective doctoral applicants from underserved communities, the doctoral application process may be bewildering and difficult to navigate (see wealth of advice texts – YouTube videos, blog posts).

▶ Equally, respondents to inquiries may make snap judgements, perhaps giving limited thought to their gatekeeping function.

Our project research objectives: PADC at Warwick

▶ Emerges from our various roles/contexts as new supervisor in dept, and as DPGR who has led work in this area.

▶ To understand how supervisors, DPGRs, and POs make decisions about responding to potential doctoral applicants at the pre-application stage, and to explore how these decisions may negatively impact the recruitment of diverse talent.

▶ To evaluate the extent to which Doctoral College/departmental webpages on PGR admissions transparently describe the pre-application stage.

▶ To identify changes at institutional and department levels to create a more transparent and inclusive doctoral admissions process, with a particular focus on enhancing inclusivity.

▶ To produce a suite of professional development opportunities that facilitate the implementation of these changes.

▶ To fill a gap in current research on PADC: little known about how various institutional players think about ethics involved in PADC and what it might mean to make inclusivity-aligned judgements.

Participants and methods

Multi-method design	
Semi-structured interviews	Solicited diaries & FGDs

Semi-structured interviews

Design
- 1-hour semi-structured interviews
- focus on i) the role in relation to postgraduate research, ii) the role in pre-application stage of doctoral admissions, iii) inclusivity practices

Participants
- 11 DPGRs, 8 doctoral programme officers
- All participants drawn from across Warwick faculties

Solicited diaries & FGDs

Design
- Solicited diary forms with questions/prompts
- 6 weeks
- Online forms via Qualtrics
- Follow up FGDs

Participants
- 19 doctoral supervisors
- All participants drawn from across Warwick faculties

Early Impressions
Stakeholder 1 - Directors of Postgraduate Research and Programme Officers

▶ The role of **Director of PGR** varies in terms of involvement in gatekeeping (heavy/minimal oversight; other roles: admissions tutors or academic leads; relying heavily on supervisor endorsement)

▶ The role of **Programme Officer** varies in terms of gatekeeping, e.g., filtering suitable applicants, sending rejection emails, deciding when to pass something on

▶ POs and DPGRs want to make **more inclusive websites**; websites are a site of confusion

▶ Broadly, POs and DPGRs often discussed **'equal' treatment** - applicants with differentiated information/communication needs?

▶ **Minimal conversations** about widening participation amongst **non-traditional students** – focus largely on international students

Early Impressions
Stakeholder 3: Supervisors

▶ Some understand PADC **as a site of gatekeeping** and want to know how to enact EDI principles at this stage.

▶ Some are not sure **how to think in nuanced ways** about applicants who may require additional support (e.g., scholars at risk).

▶ Some worry that some applicants' communications might be **privileged** (e.g., access to library resources/peers/networks to prepare proposals).

▶ **Recruitment capacity/workload an issue**: how does it shape supervisor inclination to engage with 'polished' communication over students who may need more support, and therefore enact gatekeeping?

Early impressions
Disadvantaged groups?

- Overseas vs home

- External vs current students

- Mature vs recent graduates

- First generation vs highly educated background

The majority of the data suggests that pre-application communication is of great importance to the progression of an application and is a site of gatekeeping

Activities

▶ Split into groups (30 min)

 – Option 1: focus on emails

 – Option 2: focus on websites

▶ Group discussion to finish (15 min)

 – Groups report back

 – Open the floor to ideas for recommendations based on the activity

Group Feedback: Drawing out implications for practice

Stakeholder	Recommendations
Supervisors	
Departmental level	
Institution level	

Thank you!

Where to find out more

▶ Look at our website here https://warwick.ac.uk/padc

▶ Follow along with the convo on Twitter using the hashtag **#PADC_project**

▶ Follow us on Twitter: @EmilyFrascatore @AhmadAkkad_ @Dangeni_ @jiaburford